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MINISTRIES

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Parashah Points: Massei - In Defense of the Death Penalty

Welcome to another episode of Parashah Points—short thoughts from the weekly Torah Portion.

This week’s Parashah Point comes from Massei, and it goes from Numbers 33:1 to Numbers 36:13.

This Torah portion discusses the stages of Israel’s journey from Egypt, instructions for taking the land of Israel, laws concerning the cities for the Levites and the cities of refuge, and the laws concerning the marriage of female heirs.

There’s a lot we can talk about in this Torah Portion. Today we’re going to talk about the death penalty.

Numbers 35:16-18

But if he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. And if he struck him down with a stone tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death. Or if he struck him down with a wooden tool that could cause death, and he died, he is a murderer. The murderer shall be put to death.

The Torah is unambiguous that some sins require the sinner to be put to death. Legally putting someone to death is known as capital punishment or simply the death penalty. But many look at the death penalty as immoral.

For instance, recently the Catholic Pope announced a change to the Universal Catechism of the Catholic Church to teach that the death penalty is inadmissible in all cases. He called the death penalty an “attack” on human dignity. Further, he stated that the mission of the Catholic Church is now to see the death penalty abolished worldwide.

While it’s understandable that the Pope does not personally like the death penalty, it’s quite alarming that he would call it immoral. God was the one who instituted the death penalty, and he considered it a morally appropriate means of punishment for certain crimes. Thus, calling the death penalty universally “inadmissible” and an “attack” on human dignity is to place oneself above God as a moral authority.

God didn't view the death penalty as an attack on human dignity—in fact, God first establishes the death penalty on the basis of human dignity:

Genesis 9:6

Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

From a biblical perspective, the death penalty reflects the dignity of the *innocent life* that was taken. At times, it is the only punishment that truly fits the crime.

Some might object, “But God commands us not to murder!” This is true, but the death penalty does not qualify as murder by definition. God gave authority to the governing body of a nation to administer the death penalty (e.g. Deuteronomy 17:8-12), and therefore it is a just means of punishment for certain capital offenses.

Another objection is that something changed in the New Testament. It's sometimes asserted that Yeshua abolished the death penalty. However, that doesn't appear to be the case. Yeshua affirmed the validity of the death penalty as part of the Torah in Matthew 5:17-20 when he said that he did not come to abolish the Law and that every “iota and dot” remains binding and authoritative. He even affirms the validity of the death penalty directly in Matthew 15:3-4, quoting Exodus 21:17, when he says, “Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.”

Furthermore, Paul likewise affirmed the validity of the death penalty in Acts 25:10-11. He said that if the charges against him were true, he was willing to be executed. He pled innocent to the charges, but the fact remains that he acknowledged that certain crimes, if proven true, warranted the death penalty.

So, since the death penalty can be clearly established biblically, why do many today stand opposed to it? Again, the Catholic Pope's recent remarks on the issue are perhaps representative of how many justify their moral opposition to the death penalty. This is what he said:

“More effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.”

In other words, since better prison systems have been developed, which ensure the safety of the general public, execution is unneeded—especially since it deprives the guilty of his opportunity to repent. Here are some responses to this argument:

First, regarding better prison systems, while that's true in the Western World, it doesn't hold true for the whole world. Many of the prison systems in other parts of the world, especially in third world countries, are absolutely terrible, inhumane conditions. So, this is not a good basis for declaring that the death penalty is universally inadmissible.

Second, regarding depriving a criminal of his opportunity for redemption, an argument could be made that someone is far more likely to repent and receive the Lord when they know they will be executed on a certain date than if they are left to go insane in seemingly never-ending solitary confinement.

The bottom line, again, is that God instituted the death penalty. God's ways are for our good. And if

someone thinks of the death penalty as immoral, they would need to explain how forcing someone to rot in prison for the rest of their life respects their human dignity more than execution. What if a twenty-year-old man murders a little girl and is sentenced to life in prison? It could be argued that execution respects that criminal's human dignity far more than having him waste away for entire decades in a prison cell.

In conclusion, while it's fine for believers to disagree for various reasons, about whether the death penalty ought to be used in places like the Western World today, to call the death penalty immoral is simply unbiblical.

Thank you for joining us for another Parashah Point!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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